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A sham withdrawal

SOVIET DECEPTION IN AFGHANISTAN

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In a speech in Vladivostok on 28 July 1986, Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev announced his intention to withdraw some of Moscow's troops from Afghanistan. According to Gorbachev, "Before the end of 1986 . . . one tank regiment, two motorized rifle regiments and three antiaircraft regiments will be returned from Afghanistan to the homeland with their authorized equipment and arms. These units will return . . . in such a way that all who are interested can easily verify." The details were left to later announcements by the Ministry of Defense.

The rest of the world, particularly the US Intelligence Community, regarded such a voluntary action with widespread disbelief. Beginning with a worst-case premise that the Soviets were planning to enhance in some way their public image and improve their position in Afghanistan, US analysts were consciously looking for indicators of deception.

Soviet Problems

Gorbachev's speech came amid an effort to change the image of the USSR abroad and to alleviate economic problems at home. As an acknowledged dynamic leader with new ideas, Gorbachev made it known that he considered Afghanistan a "bleeding wound." After six and one-half years of occupation, no immediate victory was in sight. Moscow had over 118,000 men in country, in addition to those providing logistic support from the USSR. The Soviets had suffered over 35,000 casualties, and the Afghan military and government were estimated to be in no better position than before the 1979 invasion. Finally, the Soviets' clear superiority in air power was being challenged by the introduction of improved surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems, including the British Blowpipe and the US Stinger.

In the USSR, discontent with the Afghan war was becoming more vocal, ironically because of Gorbachev's openness policies. *Glasnost* and *perestroika* had also opened a Pandora's box of complaints and criticism, primarily concerning domestic economics.

In the international arena, the Soviets had continued to suffer politically from their invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. Sino-Soviet relations, already strained, had become virtually nonexistent. Beijing cited the Afghan situation as one of three major obstacles to normalized relations. The US embargoes and boycotts of Soviet goods and a chill in relations had only been aggravated by constant US reminders of the Afghan war. The UN annually condemned Moscow's interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs.

The internal and external situations associated with Afghanistan, combined with Gorbachev's desires to create a new image for the USSR, led many to believe that Moscow would undertake some type of operation in Afghanistan from which it could reap a propaganda benefit. Within the US Intelligence Community, the widespread agreement that the Soviets were not ready to abandon Afghanistan and admit defeat complicated the analysis of Soviet intentions. As a result, the Intelligence Community examined the Soviet "withdrawal" from the perspective of an attempted deception operation.

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*Deception***The Indicators**

There were indications concerning a Soviet troop withdrawal from Afghanistan months before Gorbachev's speech, but these were discovered only in retrospect. At Soviet garrisons in both eastern and western Afghanistan, preparations had been under way to facilitate unit withdrawals. Once the specific types of units were announced, analysts were able to narrow search areas and to limit the number of details to be analyzed by focusing on a small number of Soviet installations.

The first tipoff was the announcement that "three air defense regiments," the only three such units in Afghanistan, would be withdrawn. This reduced the scope of intelligence collection efforts, and it also reinforced the belief that the withdrawal was designed to gain political marks without diminishing the Soviet force structure. The S-60 equipped antiaircraft artillery (AAA) regiment at Kunduz and the two SA-8/GECKO SAM regiments headquartered at Kabul and Shindand had been deployed in Afghanistan as assets organic to the initial invading divisions in 1979. They did not play a key role, because there was no air threat to facilities in Afghanistan. Their continued presence probably was due to doctrinal strictures. Their withdrawal would not degrade Soviet combat operations, and it might even streamline logistic requirements.

Preparation for the withdrawal of these units consisted primarily of consolidating the various batteries at headquarters and practicing parade and convoy formations. These units were observed on an almost daily basis, and an audit trail of their actions illustrated that the Soviets were not being deceptive about their withdrawal.

Table 1

SAM REGIMENTS' ACTIVITY AT SHINDAND, 1986

<u>Date</u>	<u>Location/Unit</u>	<u>Activity</u>
13 Sept.	Shindand/SA-8/Btry	Returned to vehicle park
18 Sept.	Shindand	Review platform, parade field construction
18-22 Sept.	Shindand/SA-8/Btrys	Returned to vehicle park
23 Sept.	Shindand	Visitor area construction
2 Oct.	Shindand	Parade field, review platform, visitor area construction completed
8 Oct.	——TASS announcement of withdrawal completion dates—— ——US pronouncement of "sham withdrawal"——	
10 Oct.	Shindand	Second review platform completed
12 Oct.	Shindand/SA-8/Regt	All btrys at regt hqs.
20 Oct.	Shindand/SA-8/Regt	Practicing withdrawal
21 Oct.	Shindand/SA-8/Regt	Withdrawal ceremony
23 Oct.	——Visitor areas countrywide are disassembled——	
23 Oct.	Towraghondi/SA-8/Regt	Unit arrives
24 Oct.	Shindand/Recon Unit	Moves into former SA-8 vehicle park
2 Nov.	USSR/SA-8/Regt	Unit permanently reassigned from Afghanistan

Similarly, the announcement of a "tank regiment" withdrawal aided in the focus of collection and analytical efforts. The only tank regiment in Afghanistan was deployed in the west at Shindand. It had limited use in a counterinsurgency environment, and its assets were used mainly to provide perimeter security for the installation or for convoy escort. Two issues

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associated with the tank unit, however, made its withdrawal suspect. First, the use of the tanks as direct-fire, static-defense weapons allowed the Soviets to use their more mobile artillery assets in combat offensives. Second, the Shindand tank unit had been allowed to fall to one-third its doctrinal strength.

If the Soviets had intended, as was indicated by the construction of reviewing stands and public statements, that the withdrawal would be observed, then the tank regiment would have to be upgraded or at least augmented. In retrospect, the Soviets began tank deliveries as early as 14 July 1986. A second delivery was made in September in time for parade and convoy practice in early October.

Table 2

TANK REGIMENT ACTIVITY AT SHINDAND, 1986

<u>Date</u>	<u>Location/Unit</u>	<u>Activity</u>
14 Jul.	Shindand/Tank Regt	Approx 25 tanks arrive from the USSR
28 Jul.	——Gorbachev makes withdrawal speech——	
30 Jul.	Shindand	Tents erected
31 Aug.	Shindand	Tents moved to support area
13 Sept.	Shindand/Tank Regt	Second arrival of tanks from the USSR
18 Sept.	——Review platform and parade field construction——	
23 Sept.	——Visitor area construction begins——	
10 Oct.	Shindand/Tank Regt	Parade practice
12 Oct.	Shindand/Tank Regt	Parade practice
15 Oct.	Shindand/Tank Regt	Withdrawal ceremony
23 Oct.	——Visitors' areas countrywide disassembled——	

By stripping tanks from units in the USSR, the Shindand tank regiment was brought up to strength—approximately 80 tanks. Journalists who were invited to attend the withdrawal ceremonies on 15 October observed a regimental-size tank unit convoy out of Shindand. It consisted, however, of a mix of T-55 and T-62 tanks; the Soviets doctrinally do not mix tank variants within regiments. This confirmed previous analysis that the Soviets did rely on tanks for static defense and that they were not serious about withdrawing from Afghanistan at that time.

The announcement of the withdrawal of two motorized rifle units provided little information with which to narrow the focus of the collection and analytical effort. The majority of Soviet combat units were motorized rifle regiments (MRR) deployed throughout the country, and the removal of two would be extremely difficult to track, as well as to explain in terms of Soviet propaganda. Two MRRs would equate to approximately 5,000 men, a significant number of combat forces, and their removal would have a negative impact on Soviet offensive operations.

The identification of construction activity associated with preparation for unit removals from Konduz, Shindand, and Kabul provided a basis for what indicators to look for elsewhere. When no other construction activity was noted at other garrisons, the conclusion was that the MRRs "withdrawn" would be collocated with the tanks and AAA/SAM units. The difficulty in the analysis, however, arose when the level of fighting and type of terrain in Konduz and Shindand indicated the Soviets would need to retain MRRs, not remove them, in order to conduct effective combat offensives.

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The initial indicators did not clarify the situation. In Konduz, elements from the MRR were observed moving out of their vehicle park immediately following Gorbachev's speech, and trucks with towed artillery had arrived. This activity was duplicated in September at Shindand. The replacement of BTR and BMP armored personnel carriers with trucks and towed artillery presented an extremely confusing picture. After observing the activity surrounding the Shindand tank regiment, it became apparent the Soviets were deploying equipment to create two low-strength MRRs that would be withdrawn.

Table 3

MRR ACTIVITY AT KONDUZ, 1986

<u>Date</u>	<u>Location/Unit</u>	<u>Activity</u>
15 Apr.	Konduz	Parade field construction
2 Jun.	Konduz	Review stand construction
7 Jun.	Konduz/MRR	Depart garrison
28 Jun.	——Gorbachev makes withdrawal announcement——	
29 Jul.	Konduz	Tents added
11 Aug.	Konduz/MRR Arty units	Consolidated at garrison
29 Aug.	Konduz/New MRR	Elements arrive CP for new MRR
7 Sept.	Konduz/New MRR	Consolidated at vehicle park
13 Sept.	Konduz/MRR	Old MRR CP departs
16 Sept.	Konduz	Construction begins, visitors' area
3 Oct.	Konduz	Parade field completed
3 Oct.	Konduz/New MRR	Parade practice
5 Oct.	Konduz/New MRR	Convoy practice
8 Oct.	——TASS announcement of withdrawal dates——	
	——US terms withdrawal "sham"——	
12 Oct.	Konduz/MRRs	Trucks moved out from new MRR; APCs moved in from old MRR
16 Oct.	Konduz/New MRR mix	Practice convoy, parade
17 Oct.	Konduz/MRRs	New MRR mix departs
22 Oct.	Konduz/MRRs	New MRR mix arrives at border
23 Oct.	Konduz/Old MRR	Old MRR vehicles return to vehicle park

By 8 October, the Soviets had progressed far enough to announce specific dates. Through TASS, Moscow stated that the six regiments would be removed between 15 and 31 October and that foreign journalists would be invited to view the departures. But by 8 October, the Intelligence Community had enough evidence to provide policymakers with the assessment that a "sham withdrawal" was under way. The US Government made its announcement.

The public US condemnation caused the Soviets to commit a final act providing confirming evidence that the withdrawal was a political move. Denying that the two MRRs were hollow units, the Soviets stripped BMPs and BTRs from the original units in Shindand and Konduz and replaced the trucks to beef up the newly created MRRs. Although journalists observed actual armored personnel carriers convoying out of these garrisons, imagery of the border area showed only equipment brought in from the USSR for the withdrawal actually crossed back into the Soviet Union. The BTRs and BMPs that had always been in Afghanistan did not cross the border but turned around and redeployed back to their original vehicle parks.

Deception**SECRET/NOFORN****Conclusions**

The “sham withdrawal” operation is the most recent historical example of the capability of the intelligence and warning (I&W) system to support US strategic objectives. Two important factors actually oriented the I&W community and allowed it to respond in a timely and accurate manner. First, there was the predisposition to believe that the Soviets had a hidden agenda. Second, the previous six years of war had allowed for the development of a substantial collection plan against Afghanistan. Without the dedication of assets, many details might have been missed. In retrospect, several indicators that were previously present were observed only after Gorbachev’s July speech.

The “sham withdrawal” brings out several lessons that remain applicable to future US I&W efforts. The importance of alerting assets by approaching a problem from the all-source viewpoint is crucial. By examining Gorbachev’s speech and subsequent political announcements and press items, it was possible to direct collection efforts and filter out unrelated developments. The importance of time versus accuracy also was vital. The development of indicators and “proof” of Soviet deception required reevaluation of previous reports and compilation of evidence over a period of several weeks. Without waiting for key pieces, a clear picture might not have emerged or been made public. Still, the Intelligence Community provided the information before the event was over, allowing US policymakers to make public statements at a critical point—countering the TASS announcement.

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